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SUBJECT: EAST JAVA'S MUSLIM LEADERS, OBSERVERS COMMENT ON  
NU-MUHAMMADIYAH RELATIONS

REF: A. 04 JAKARTA 902 (NU -- BIG LOOSE AND BOTTOM-UP)  
[1B.](#) 05 JAKARTA 10917 (PKB VERDICT UPS THE ANTE IN  
EAST JAVA)  
[1C.](#) 04 JAKARTA 911 (PIOUS TECHNOCRATS: A PROFILE OF  
MUHAMMADIYAH)  
[1D.](#) 01 JAKARTA 1349 (NU BLOOD LUST)

Classified By: Political Officer Catherine E. Sweet, Reason 1.4(d)

[11.](#) (C) Summary. On October 10, we met with the East Java provincial leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah to discuss their organizations' activities in East Java. We also called on political scientist Aribowo from Surabaya's Airlangga University, who shared his observations (based in part on USAID-funded research) on the state of East Javanese political Islam. From these discussions, it was clear that NU is still the dominant player in the province of its birth, and former Indonesian president and NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid (aka Gus Dur) remains iconic. At the same time, although less popular in East Java than NU, Muhammadiyah is playing an increasingly active role in civil society. And while relations between the two groups have improved significantly since NU supporters attacked Muhammadiyah schools and buildings in 2001, some tensions persist. End summary.

East Java: Cradle of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)

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[12.](#) (SBU) On October 10, we met with the East Java provincial leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah to discuss their organizations' activities in East Java. We also called on political scientist Aribowo from Surabaya's Airlangga University, who shared his observations (based in part on USAID-funded research) on the state of East Javanese political Islam. The most important civil society organization in East Java is Nadhlatul Ulama, a mass Muslim movement that claims a nationwide membership of 40-45 million. Founded 80 years ago in East Java, NU is primarily populated by rural Javanese (although it has a strong presence in Java's large cities as well). NU's East Java Deputy Chairman Sholeh Hayat and other local officials explained that throughout Indonesia, NU focuses on four main areas: proselytizing (dakwah); education; delivery of social services; and economic development. To this end, NU clerics (kiai) run the vast majority of Java's pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools), as well as a significant number of higher education institutions and hospitals. In East Java alone, NU administers 42 hospitals and some 5000 pesantrens.

[13.](#) (U) A variety of committees, social institutes and semi-autonomous organizations fall under the NU tent. The

institutes work on NU's priority issues in conjunction with the autonomous bodies, which are organized primarily by age and sex (women's and student groups, a labor organization, and a martial arts self-defense group). For instance, NU's young women's organization, Fatayat, works mainly on education, anti-trafficking, reproductive health and HIV-AIDS issues through its approximately 9000 chapters.

#### The Centrality of the Kiais

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**¶4.** (U) NU followers tend to practice a syncretic form of Islam that blends Indonesians' traditional religious practices (themselves heavily influenced by Hinduism, which predates Islam on the archipelago) with Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and the relatively moderate Shafa'i branch of Islam jurisprudence (ref A). Perhaps the most significant factor differentiating NU followers from their coreligionists in organizations like Muhammadiyah is the role of the kiai (also sometimes referred to as ulama), or local religious leader. The kiai, a man educated in Islamic teachings and law (ilmu fiqh), holds tremendous authority within his community, with his followers looking to him for spiritual and other guidance.

**¶5.** (SBU) Political scientist Aribowo described three primary routes to becoming a kiai. First, and most traditionally, is blood descent from a kiai family (former President Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, became a kiai via this method of transmission). Second, a kiai may identify a particularly clever student (santri) studying at his pesantren as a kiai candidate. That student would then be expected to become proficient in Islamic teachings and found his own pesantren. Once established, the community would

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deem him a kiai. A related method for non-genetic kiais to attain the title is to marry into a kiai family. These latter two methods are becoming increasingly common, Aribowo said; indeed, current NU chairman and Gus Dur rival Hasyim Muzadi became a kiai in this way. According to Aribowo, Gus Dur's supporters use this to discredit Muzadi, claiming that he is not a "real" kiai like Gus Dur, who is of "royal" kiai/NU blood (Gus Dur's grandfather was NU founder Hasyim Asy'ari, and his father a former minister of religion).

**¶6.** (SBU) While they all fall under the same NU rubric, Aribowo noted that the kiai are factionalized both politically and socially. He said that although the kiai were united in supporting Gus Dur while he was president, the internal conflicts that have developed within NU and its affiliated political party, the National Awakening Party (PKB), since Wahid's impeachment are mirrored within the kiai community (ref B and previous). Aribowo lamented the negative effect that this politicization has had on the "dignity" of the kiai, who he contended previously preferred to not involve themselves in politics. This conflict notwithstanding, Aribowo's research has determined that NU voters will continue to support PKB and will choose candidates based in part on their kiai's instructions.

#### The Cult of Gus Dur

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**¶7.** (SBU) Aribowo believes that until Gus Dur dies, there will be no reconciliation among the various PKB and NU factions. Indeed, a Gus Dur cult of personality persists, fueled in part by his miraculous survival of a series of strokes that Aribowo claimed should have killed him three times over (although he did acknowledge that Gus Dur has been "slipping" lately). And while NU is Muzadi's organization structurally, it is Gus Dur's culturally. Aribowo repeatedly referred to Gus Dur as an "extraordinary" politician, one who can talk with ease about everything from classical music to soccer. As a key reformer within NU, Gus Dur promoted democracy and modernism, and remains a symbol of pluralism,

he said. Moreover, Wahid has opposed the "Arabization" of Indonesian Islam and culture, even urging Indonesian Muslims to use the Indonesian language when greeting one another, rather than the Arabic expression "assalama alaykum."

¶8. (SBU) Aribowo also praised Gus Dur's audacity and willingness to capitalize on his stature to take controversial positions. Aribowo referred to an incident this past April when Gus Dur fielded a question on a radio program about Indonesia's draft anti-pornography/pornographic action law, which he openly opposes (although NU as an organization supports it). Trying to emphasize that the definition of pornography is relative, Wahid remarked that even the Qur'an could be considered pornographic since it talks about breastfeeding (Al-Baqara 233) and illicit sexual relations (Surat Yusuf). (Note. Despite his venerable reputation, Wahid seems to have overreached with those remarks. Following his comments, more than 500 outraged Javanese ulama issued a statement condemning Gus Dur's remarks, and in May, while Wahid was speaking at an interfaith seminar in West Java, radicals from the extremist Islamic Defenders Front, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Forum Umat Islam, and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's Islamic Mujaheddin Council forcibly chased Wahid from the stage. End Note.)

Muhammadiyah: Relations on the Mend, but Tensions Remain

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¶9. (SBU) For their part, East Java's Muhammadiyah membership is somewhat less enamored of Gus Dur and NU. Structurally and doctrinally and, the organizations are quite different, with Muhammadiyah's command structure much more rigid and hierarchical than NU's (ref C). Where NU draws its support primarily from rural and poorer Indonesians, Muhammadiyah has traditionally been strongest among the urban elite and within the business community (East Java Muhammadiyah Chairman Shafiq Mughni called it a "university-based organization").

¶10. (U) Doctrinally, Muhammadiyah tends to be more conservative, rejecting NU's syncretism in favor of Islamic modernism, a school of thought pioneered by Arab intellectuals like Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (Note. Modernism advocates the application of "Western" science, technology, and intellectual methods -- notably reason -- to bring Islam to a purer and more advanced state. End Note.) As a

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modernist movement, Muhammadiyah, which was founded in Yogyakarta in 1912 and claims a national membership of roughly 30 million, rejects strict adherence to any one school of Islamic jurisprudence and, by extension, the intercession of intermediaries like kiais. (Indonesians often comment that Muhammadiyah is more of a "protestant" organization and NU a "Catholic" one, given the latter's reliance on religious intermediaries to interpret God's will.) Muhammadiyah advocates returning to the original Islamic texts (Qur'an and hadith) and reinterpreting them afresh with a modern perspective.

¶11. (U) Consequently, Muhammadiyah stresses the importance of education; this is reflected in the strength of Muhammadiyah's school system, which brings together a state-sanctioned secular curriculum with a religious one. There are more than 10,000 Muhammadiyah primary and secondary schools nationwide and 164 universities; students do not need to be affiliated with Muhammadiyah to attend (in fact, Mughni pointedly noted, about 30-40 percent of their East Java students are affiliated with NU, adding that current NU head Hasyim Muzadi's children are graduates of Muhammadiyah's university in Malang).

¶12. (U) In East Java, according to Mughni, Muhammadiyah membership runs in the 7-9 million range. This figure includes members of its autonomous youth, student, women's and martial arts organizations, but excludes students

enrolled at Muhammadiyah schools who are not formally affiliated with Muhammadiyah. In NU's heartland, Muhammadiyah operates far fewer schools (approximately 1400 schools and 14 institutions of higher learning) than its rival, although Mughni asserted that Muhammadiyah is expanding its facilities in the region. Its membership and leadership are also diversifying, he said: of the 13-member provincial board, five are professors, one is a kiai, and one (Mughni) has a Ph.D. (Mughni received his Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from UCLA; he will be leaving Indonesia shortly to begin a Fulbright teaching fellowship in Buffalo, New York.)

¶13. (C) Mughni said that relations in East Java between Muhammadiyah and NU, which were heavily damaged by NU supporters' attacks on Muhammadiyah facilities in 2001 (NU adherents blamed former Muhammadiyah chairman and then-head of the People's Consultative Assembly, Amien Rais, for orchestrating Gus Dur's impeachment; ref D and previous), are getting better. Still, bitterness was not far from the surface when Mughni spoke about NU. For example, he made a disparaging remark about Gus Dur traveling abroad while he was president, allegedly trying to drum up funding for NU rather than for Indonesia. He also criticized NU's lack of transparency and accountability, which he said stems from NU members being "under the control of the kiais," men who "are like kings and control all."

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